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No. 00-0037

IN THE

# Supreme Court of the United States

LAURA HOLLISTER,

*Cross-Petitioner,*

*v.*

TARGET CORPORATION,

*Cross-Respondent.*

**ON CONDITIONAL CROSS-PETITION FOR A WRIT OF CERTIORARI TO THE UNITED STATES COURT OF APPEALS FOR THE SIXTH CIRCUIT**

## CONDITIONAL CROSS-PETITION FOR WRIT OF CERTIORARI

STEVEN P. HANDLER
*Counsel of Record*
CHARLES M. GERING
McDERMOTT, WILL & EMERY
227 West Monroe Street
Chicago, Illinois 60606
(312) 372-2000

ROBERT P. LYNN, JR.
ROBERT P. LYNN, JR., L.L.C.
330 Old Country Road
Suite 103
Mineola, New York 11501
(516) 742-6200

*Attorneys for Cross-Petitioner*

160622

Counsel Press LLC
(800) 274-3321 • (800) 359-6859

## QUESTION PRESENTED

Whether a federal court of appeals violates the principles set forth in *Erie Railroad Co. v. Tompkins*, 304 U.S. 64 (1938), by failing to correctly apply state law to its analysis of state law claims in a diversity case.

## LIST OF PARTIES

American Community Mutual Insurance Company, initially served as a respondent, is being served as a cross-respondent herein.

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Laura Hollister ("Hollister") respectfully cross-petitions this Court to issue a writ of certiorari to review the judgment of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit in *Hollister v. Dayton Hudson Corporation*, 201 F.3d 731 (2000).

## OPINIONS BELOW

The opinion of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan granting summary judgment in Dayton Hudson's favor is reported at 5 F. Supp. 2d 530 and is reproduced in the appendix of Dayton Hudson's Petition for a Writ of Certiorari (hereinafter "Pet. App.") at pages 23a to 46a. The original opinion of the United States Court of Appeals for the Sixth Circuit is reported at 188 F.3d 414 and is reproduced at Pet. App., pp. 22a-1 to 22a-16. The amended opinion of the court of appeals which is the subject of this petition is reported at 201 F.3d 731 and is reproduced at Pet. App., pp. 1a to 22a. The opinion of the court of appeals denying the parties' petitions for rehearing *en banc* is unreported and is reproduced at Pet. App., pp. 47a to 48a.

## STATEMENT OF JURISDICTION

The Petition for a Writ of Certiorari of Dayton Hudson Corporation, now known as Target Corporation ("Petitioner" or "Dayton Hudson"), was docketed on June 1, 2000. The jurisdiction of this Court is invoked pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1254(1) and Rule 12.5 of the Rules of the Supreme Court and is conditional upon this Court's grant of the Petition for Writ of Certiorari.

## STATUTES OR OTHER PROVISIONS INVOLVED

None.

## STATEMENT OF THE CASE

On November 5, 1995, Laura Hollister, then a 25-year-old student at Northwestern University's business school in Evanston, Illinois, was severely burned when her rayon shirt contacted the burner of the electric stove in her apartment. Because the fire burned so rapidly and intensely, only a few small remnants of the shirt survived the fire, and the manufacturer of the shirt could not be identified from those remnants. Hollister sued the seller of the shirt, Dayton Hudson, asserting design defect and failure to warn claims under both negligence and implied warranty legal theories.

Hollister suffered severe burns in the fire and was profoundly disfigured as a result of those burns. Virtually all of her upper body was burned, from her hips to the top of her head. She has required comprehensive skin grafting to the entire upper portion of her body, as well as extensive plastic and reconstructive surgery. Her burns caused her to lose both of her breasts, her nose, her ears, her chin, and most of her left thumb. She has endured countless hours of surgery and enormous pain and suffering. She likely will continue to require treatment and further surgeries for the rest of her life.

The fire in Hollister's apartment was investigated by the Evanston Fire Department and the United States Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms ("ATF"). The Evanston Fire Department Incident Report, which was completed after the fire department personnel had been to Hollister's apartment

on the day of the fire, indicates that the fire started in Hollister's kitchen when Hollister's clothing was ignited while she was cooking. These findings were confirmed in the report of the ATF, which investigated the fire at the request of the Evanston Fire Department. The ATF investigator made the following findings regarding the origin of the fire and Hollister's actions after her shirt caught on fire:

> The origin of the fire was in the kitchen. The victim's clothing was apparently ignited by the burner on the electric stove while she was cooking. Firefighters arriving to assist the ambulance crew reported that the right front and right rear burners were red hot. Ms. Hollister was wearing a plaid shirt that buttoned up the front and a second pullover top under that. She was apparently not wearing any skirt or slacks so the shirttail may have moved onto the burner while she reached into a cabinet over the stove. The fire spread on her clothing and some burned cloth fell to the kitchen floor. She apparently attempted to put out the flames by leaning over the counter in an attempt to smother the flames. She next ran into the bathroom and attempted to put out the flames using water from the tub, more of the burning material fell to the floor in the bathroom and burned the center of a small throw rug and the tile floor beneath it. The victim then filled the tub and soaked in it because more burned clothing was found in the tub full of water. The tub apparently overflowed soaking the carpeting in the hall and damaging the bottom of the plasterboard walls. The victim subsequently went

> to her bedroom and rested on the bed as more burned clothing (some wet) and some evidence of body fluids were visible there. These observations were made from the combination of eye witnesses, fire fighters, and the evidence of normal fire progression during the origin and cause determination.

Based upon these findings, the ATF investigator came to the following conclusion:

> After careful examination of this fire scene along with any relevant reports it is my opinion that the cause of this fire should be classified as accidental caused by ignition of the victim's clothing by the stove burner while she was cooking.

Because of the intensity of the fire, few remnants of the shirt remained after the fire. These remnants were gathered by Evanston Police and Fire Department personnel on November 5-6, 1995. The shirt remnants consist of several pieces of the shirt, certain of which are so severely burned that only a faint trace of the plaid pattern is discernible. Three substantial pieces remain: a cuff, a piece of the front of the shirt with a button hole and button, and a single-ply piece.

Plaintiff's fabrics expert, Dr. David Hall, Professor Emeritus of Textile Engineering at Auburn University, examined certain of the fabric remnants, and performed flammability tests on substantially identical exemplar fabric. The exemplar fabric Dr. Hall tested came from shirts purchased at a Dayton Hudson store. These exemplar shirts initially were identified by Dayton Hudson's expert. Dr. Hall analyzed the fabric of the exemplar shirts, and determined

that the exemplar shirts and the shirt Hollister wore at the time of the fire were extremely close in weight and had the same weave, fiber type (100% Rayon), fiber denier, and air porosity.

Dr. Hall compared the physical properties, as well as the ignition and burning characteristics, of the exemplar fabric to certain other types of fabric. Dr. Hall first put an exemplar shirt on a hanger and passed it back and forth once over the burner of a GE electric range similar to Hollister's. The front of the shirt contacted, but never rested on, the hot burner. The shirt caught fire immediately and was completely engulfed in flames within approximately ten seconds, with flames shooting at least one foot higher than the shoulder of the shirt.

Dr. Hall next cut a 3.5 by 10.0 inch sample of the fabric from another exemplar shirt and tested its flammability against the same size samples of fourteen other materials. These other materials included three other types of rayon (of assorted weaves, two of comparable weight to that of the exemplar shirt and one of heavier weight), a rayon/wool blend, a rayon/polyester blend, and a rayon/acetate blend, as well as samples of wool, acrylic, acetate, silk, polyester, and cotton. Finally, Dr. Hall tested a sample of news print from a U.S.A. Today newspaper.

The test samples were individually put on a swing arm and then passed over the burner of the same electric range used for the test of the exemplar shirt. Like the exemplar shirt, the samples contacted, but never rested on, the hot burner. The fabric sample from the exemplar shirt ignited from the contact and burned completely in six seconds. Eleven of the other fourteen test samples did not ignite. This

group included the cotton sample and a 100% rayon fabric from a shirt that was manufactured in the United States.

The three test samples that did ignite were a 100% rayon produced overseas, a rayon-polyester blend, and the newspaper. The other 100% rayon and the rayon-polyester blend burned in approximately twelve seconds, or about twice as long as the sample from the exemplar shirt. The newspaper burned slightly faster than the exemplar shirt, in about four seconds. Dr. Hall's testing was recorded on videotape, and a copy of the tape is included in the record.

On March 27, 1996, Hollister's parents filed the present action on her behalf in Wayne County, Michigan, Circuit Court. It was removed to the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan on July 11, 1996.[1] The suit charged that Dayton Hudson was negligent and breached an implied warranty by selling a highly flammable shirt and by failing to warn of the shirt's dangerous flammability. Several other defendants were originally named in the action, but were subsequently dismissed from the case. Pursuant to a motion filed on July 31, 1997, Hollister was substituted for her parents as the plaintiff in this action.

On May 12, 1998, the district court awarded Dayton Hudson summary judgment. (*See* Pet. App., pp. 23a to 46a.) The jurisdiction of the United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan was premised on 28 U.S.C. § 1332, in that the amount in controversy exceeds $75,000 and this is a civil action between citizens of different states.

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1. Service of process on the first defendant served took place on June 14, 1996, and that defendant's Notice of Removal was filed in the district court on July 11, 1996.

Specifically, plaintiff Laura Hollister is a citizen of Michigan, while defendant Dayton Hudson Corporation is incorporated and has its principal place of business in Minnesota.

On August 25, 1999, a panel of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals affirmed. (*See* Pet. App., pp. 22a-1 to 22a-16.) On September 7, 1999, Hollister filed a combined petition for panel rehearing and rehearing *en banc*. On January 13, 2000, the same panel filed an amended opinion, reversing summary judgment as to plaintiff's failure to warn claim, but affirming summary judgment as to her design defect claim. (*See* Pet. App., pp. 1a to 22a.) On March 2, 2000, the court of appeals denied the parties' petitions for rehearing *en banc*. (*See* Pet. App., pp. 47a to 48a.)

## REASONS FOR ALLOWING THE WRIT

The Petitioner has requested that this Court review the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals' application of Michigan law in this diversity case. In support of its request, the Petitioner argues that the court of appeals failed to conduct a principled analysis of Michigan law pursuant to *Erie Railroad Co. v. Tompkins*, 304 U.S. 64 (1938), and that the court therefore reached an erroneous result in its analysis of Hollister's failure to warn claim.

For the reasons that will be set forth in her brief in opposition to Dayton Hudson's petition, Hollister believes that Dayton Hudson's argument is entirely without merit, and that this Court should decline to accept this case for review. Indeed, if this Court accepted the Petitioner's argument, virtually every case in which a federal court applies state law would be appropriate for review by this

Court. Nevertheless, if this Court accepts the Petitioner's reasoning concerning the importance of review in this case, then this Court should review the court of appeals' application of Michigan law to all of the issues that were before it, and not merely the subset of issues raised in Dayton Hudson's petition. If this Court is inclined to examine the court of appeals' analysis, it will quickly become clear that the court's errors were confined to the portion of its amended opinion in which it affirmed summary judgment against Hollister on her design defect claim. Thus, if this Court allows a writ in this case based on the flawed arguments raised in the Petition for a Writ of Certiorari, it should allow the writ requested herein, as the only errors in the court's opinion relate to its design defect analysis.

## I. The Court of Appeals' Analysis of Hollister's Design Defect Claim is Inconsistent With Sixth Circuit Precedent.

In its amended opinion, the court held that plaintiff could not establish a *prima facie* case of design defect unless she showed that a safer shirt could be produced which had all the wear and aesthetic qualities of the shirt she was wearing at the time of her injury:

> Hollister's claim of design defect is primarily based upon the tests conducted by Dr. Hall, in which the exemplar fabric and fourteen other fabric samples were dragged across a hot burner at a prescribed rate. Those tests indicate that the exemplar fabric was significantly more flammable than other fabrics. Hollister presented no evidence, however, as to the availability of alternative fabrics when the shirt was

> manufactured, the cost of manufacturing the shirt with such fabrics, or the effect of a fabric change upon the wearability, durability, or appearance of the fabric. (Pet. App., p. 13a)

Contrary to the court of appeals' opinion, Hollister presented ample evidence of the availability of alternative fabrics.

Plaintiff's fabric expert, Dr. Hall, performed videotaped testing of a substantially identical exemplar shirt against fourteen other types of fabrics, including other rayons, wool, silk, polyester, and cotton. To the extent that actual evidence was needed that these common materials were available for use in women's shirts and blouses in 1988-89 when the Dayton Hudson shirt was sold, plaintiff did present documentary evidence regarding all of those fabrics except silk. (*See* R. 262, Plaintiff's Supplemental Response, Exh. 2, Joint Appendix at pp. 797-802.) Silk, of course, has been used in clothing for approximately 4 millennia. Moreover, in his videotaped testing, Dr. Hall stated that each of the alternative fabrics in the test was commercially available. (R. 312, Fabric Flammability Testing Videotape, Joint Appendix at p. 937.) One of his expert reports also stated that "[t]here are other practical and economical alternative methods to make a safer product without substantially increasing the cost of the garment." (R. 224, Exh. 17, p. 1, Joint Appendix at p. 509.) Thus, the record shows beyond dispute that plaintiff presented evidence regarding both the availability of alternative fabrics and the comparable cost for such fabrics.

In other words, the court's last factor (wearability, durability, or appearance) is the only one on which plaintiff

arguably did not present evidence.[2] Consequently, the court ruled that plaintiff did not present a *prima facie* case of design defect, because plaintiff did not show that the alternative fabrics in Dr. Hall's tests had the same wearability, durability, and appearance as the Dayton Hudson shirt involved in the injury.

The court's ruling is directly contrary to its previous decision in *Phillips v. Hardware Wholesalers, Inc.*, 762 F.2d 46 (6th Cir. 1985), and it represents a marked change in the risk-utility test that governs design defect cases in Michigan. *Phillips* involved an accident that occurred when an extension ladder slipped on a tile floor. The plaintiff claimed that the feet or "pads" on the bottom of the ladder were defective in that their design and the material of which they were manufactured were inadequate to prevent the ladder from slipping on certain surfaces. The plaintiff's expert witness testified that several alternatives to the pads on the plaintiff's ladder were available and further testified concerning alternative designs that were not in use at the time, but which were feasible from an engineering standpoint. He discussed advantages and disadvantages associated with the alternatives he identified. Other than identifying the material from which the alternatives were constructed, the plaintiff's expert provided no information concerning the details of the alternative designs. Moreover, other than testifying generally that the alternatives he offered would reduce slippage under conditions similar to those present at the time of plaintiff's accident, plaintiff's expert provided no quantification of the

2. Although Dr. Hall tested other rayons, plaintiff did not attempt to compare the other rayons to the shirt at issue in the case in terms of wearability, durability, or appearance. Plaintiff did not, and does not, believe such proof is necessary to establish a *prima facie* case for the reasons stated in this petition.

reduction in slippage he would expect using the alternative designs he identified.

In affirming a jury verdict for plaintiff, the court held that a plaintiff may avoid a directed verdict by "offering proof that the alternatives were in use at the time the defective product was manufactured and by presenting expert testimony that the alternatives were reasonable." *Id.* at 48 (citations omitted). The court noted that plaintiff's expert "testified that the alternatives he proposed were available, reasonably efficient, and safe . . ." *Id.* at 49. The court held that "[t]his testimony was adequate to meet [plaintiff's] burden of adducing evidence of the reasonableness of alternatives." *Id.*

The evidence Ms. Hollister produced in this case not only meets, but substantially exceeds, the standard announced in *Phillips*. As previously indicated, plaintiff's fabric expert, Dr. Hall, stated in one of his reports that "[t]here are other practical and economical alternative methods to make a safer product without substantially increasing the cost of the garment." (R. 224, Ex. 17, p. 1, Joint Appendix at p. 509.) Dr. Hall testified at his deposition that "increasing the size of the rayon fibers and the weight of the fabric would increase safety." (R. 173, Ex. A, p. 247, Joint Appendix at p. 160.) His supplemental report further pointed out that fabric flammability is affected by fiber content, weave, and air porosity in addition to weight, and that fabrics having the same weights but different weave characteristics may burn differently. (R. 224, Ex. 22, p. 2, Joint Appendix at p. 524.)

Dr. Hall then conducted videotaped fabric flammability tests, testing a substantially identical exemplar shirt against

various different types of women's shirt fabrics. In his videotaped testing, Dr. Hall stated that each of the alternative fabrics tested was commercially available. (R. 312, Fabric Flammability Testing Videotape, Joint Appendix at p. 937.) In his supplemental report concerning that testing, Dr. Hall identified the stores where certain of the alternative fabrics were purchased and provided detailed information concerning the fiber content, weight, and weave characteristics of every one of the alternative fabrics he identified and tested. (R. 224, Ex. 22, p. 1 and Table I, Joint Appendix at pp. 523, 525.) In addition, Dr. Hall's report identified certain of the fabric samples he tested as having been cut from women's blouses he purchased. (*See id.* at Table I.)

These comparison fabrics included the precise type of alternative he identified during his deposition and in his report, *i.e.*, a rayon fabric having higher weight, greater fiber size, and different air porosity. Test fabric C was a 100% rayon fabric sample cut from a woman's blouse which was heavier and more tightly woven than the exemplar fabric. (*See* R. 224, Ex. 22, Table I, Joint Appendix at p. 525.) That test fabric failed to ignite. (*See* R. 312, Fabric Flammability Testing Videotape, Joint Appendix at p. 937.)

In addition, Dr. Hall's fabric flammability tests graphically demonstrate that alternative fabrics commonly used to manufacture women's blouses either would not have ignited or would have burned significantly more slowly than plaintiff's shirt. His report provided detailed information concerning the fiber content, weight, and weave characteristics of each of the tested alternative fabrics. (*See* R. 224, Ex. 22, Table I, Joint Appendix at p. 525.) Far from failing to identify a proposed alternative fabric,

Dr. Hall identified numerous alternative fabrics and provided detailed information concerning the content and construction of each of them. Indeed, the court observed that "Hollister presented credible evidence that the exemplar fabric burned explosively, like newspaper, and that other comparable fabrics did not." (Pet. App., p. 19a.) This evidence concerning reasonable alternatives exceeds the standard embodied in the *Phillips* decision.

## II. The Court of Appeals' Decision Represents a Significant Departure From Michigan's Risk-Utility Test.

The court of appeals' decision represents a marked change in Michigan's risk-utility test. That test, as the name implies, is a balancing test, *i.e.*, risks are balanced against utility. *Prentis v. Yale Mfg. Co.*, 365 N.W.2d 176, 185-86 (1985). The court of appeals recognized that plaintiff had established the magnitude and severity of risk from highly flammable clothing. (Pet. App., pp. 14a-16a.) Nevertheless, the court held that a jury could not balance that risk against the utility of the Dayton Hudson shirt unless plaintiff could show that an available alternative had the exact same wearability, durability, or appearance.

This standard eliminates the balancing inherent in the risk-utility test. Under the court of appeals' decision, no matter how dangerous the product, the seller will escape liability unless the plaintiff can establish that a safer alternative has the same wearability, aesthetic qualities, and consumer appeal. For example, assume highly flammable children's pajamas cannot be made less flammable without changing their durability, feel, or appearance or without increasing their cost. Does that mean that a seller of such

pajamas would have no liability if some children were burned to death wearing those pajamas regardless of the seller's knowledge of the risk? The obvious answer to that question is "no." Yet, the court of appeals' decision here would require that question to be answered "yes."

The utility of the Dayton Hudson shirt involved in this case was to cover the upper part of a woman's body. Plaintiff showed numerous alternative fabrics, including other rayons, that would have safely fulfilled that function. Dayton Hudson can argue that the appearance, wearability, and other aesthetic qualities of the shirt justified its highly flammable nature. However, under *Phillips*, that balancing of risks against alleged benefits is a jury issue. For that reason, the design defect portion of the court of appeals' opinion conflicts with Michigan law.

## CONCLUSION

For the reasons that will be set forth in her opposition to the Petition for a Writ of Certiorari, Laura Hollister believes that this Court should not accept this case for review. However, to the extent that the Court finds the reasoning set forth in the Petition concerning the importance of review persuasive, the Court should grant this Conditional Cross-Petition because the court of appeals' errors were confined to the portion of its opinion in which it affirmed summary judgment on Hollister's design defect claim.

Respectfully submitted,

STEVEN P. HANDLER
*Counsel of Record*
CHARLES M. GERING
MCDERMOTT, WILL & EMERY
227 West Monroe Street
Chicago, Illinois 60606
(312) 372-2000

ROBERT P. LYNN, JR.
ROBERT P. LYNN, JR., L.L.C.
330 Old Country Road
Suite 103
Mineola, New York 11501
(516) 742-6200

*Attorneys for Cross-Petitioner*